Conceiving and Misconceiving the Monstrous
In Fiction and in Art, in Medicine and in the Biosciences

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Biochemistry 368 / Humanities 368
TTH 2:30 – 3:45 / Herring Hall 129

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"Monstrum—an aberrant occurrence, usually biological, that was [often] taken as a sign that something was wrong within the natural order." (David Wardle)

"But these weren't the kind of monsters that had tentacles and rotting skin, the kind a seven-year-old might be able to wrap his mind around--they were monsters with human faces, in crisp uniforms, marching in lockstep, so banal you didn't recognize them for what they were until it was too late." (Ransom Riggs)

"'It's poor judgment,' said Grandpa 'to call anything by a name. We don't know what a hobgoblin or a vampire or a troll is. Could be lots of things. You can't heave them into categories with labels and say they'll act one way or another…. They're people. People who do things." (Ray Bradbury)

Monsters are products not just of nature but also of human conception. They wander forth out of evolution, out of language, out of brain physiology and social dysjunction. It is this variety of the monstrous—and its traces in the domains of art and bioscience, fiction and medicine—that we endeavor to capture this semester. Through close reading and individual creative works, and in discussions where the humanistic and scientific mix and speak to each other, we hope to understand in new ways who we are, what we fear, and with what consequences we perceive and misperceive the world around us.

SCHEDULE

I. The Nature and the Language of Anomaly: The Monstrous Cultural Body

Evolution is an explanation for the generation and shifting of forms, ever producing, over time, anomaly within averaged conformity. It forms the basis of Gould's work on "hopeful monsters," Mosher's on breeding dogs, and Easley's and Ishii's on eugenics, present and future. But the language of science is vulnerable to aesthetic and linguistic norms and to questions of power that impact perception of difference. So too does art depend on language—whether visual or narrative—reflecting cultural norms as it both represents and invents the world it sees. The monstrous body, whether in science or in art, is always, also, a cultural body (Bell, Hoagland)—a Jekyll and Hyde that reflects our habits of thinking and seeing as much as our powers of perception.

Jan 12	M/D	Introduction: The Monstrous Cultural Body
14	Mike	Mosher, "A mutation in the myostatin gene" / Gould, "The return of hopeful monsters" / Easley et al, "Gamete derivation" / Ishii, "Germline genome editing"
19	Deborah	"Menopausal Killer Whales" / Asma, *On Monsters* (Introd) Charles Bell, *The Philosophy of Expression"* Hoagland, "Circus Music"
21	Deborah	Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
26	Deborah	*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

II. Disease, Infection, Epidemic, Disability: Monstrosity and the Disordered Body

Perception blurs into misperception when it comes to our response to things we fear. Syphilis has often been paired with pollution, leprosy with disgust, AIDS with immorality. Difference and disease become examples of threatening disorder and of the power of stereotyping (Bargh), something we see in leprosy (Masaki, White), in our fear contagion (Wald), in the disfiguring disease called dystonia (Cooper, Wakabayashi-Ito), in the way we disqualify the disabled (Siebers), and in a tale of madness by Guy de Maupassant.

28	Mike	Wakabayashi-Ito, "Mutant human torsin, responsible for early onset dystonia, dominantly suppresses GTPCH expression"/ Cooper, *The Victim is Always the Same*
Feb 2	Mike	White, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts: a Memoir* (excerpts) / Masaki, "Reprogramming adult Schwann cells to stem cell-like cells by leprosy bacilli"

Feb 4	Mike	Roach, *Gulp* (excerpts) /Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, *An Essay on Abjection* (excerpt) / Bargh, "The Cognitive Monster" / **Paper One Due**
9	Deborah	Rosemary Garland Thomson, "The Gap between Representation and Reality" (12-15) / Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, & the Outbreak Narrative* (1 – 28)
11	Deborah	Siebers, "The Aesthetics of Human Disqualification" Raymond Carver, "Cathedral"
16	Speaker	TBA, / **Group Project Outline Due**

III. Psychopathology and the "Civilized": Monstrosity and the Criminal Body

"Psychopathology" is often viewed scientifically as a set of traits that are the product of reduced empathy and impaired decision-making (Thomas, Ronson or Fallon)—aberrations of the brain (Anderson & Kiehl) that can have an evolutionary advantage (del Guidice). Psychological disorder is never, however, a matter of biology alone. It is also a function of how we define unacceptable behavior (Freud) the power with which we enforce the "civilized" (O'Connor), and the shapes and origins of our common fears (Huberman).

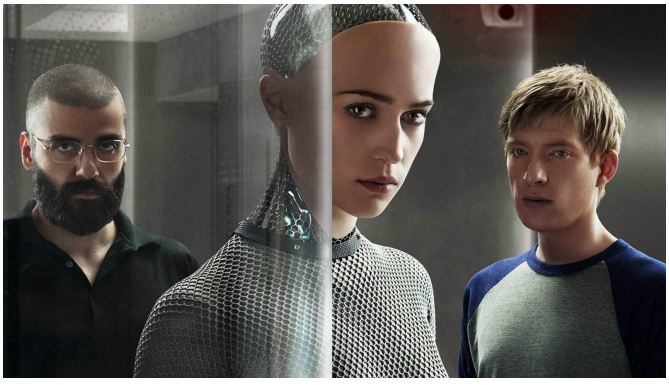
Feb 18	Mike	Choice of reading Thomas, *"Confessions of a Sociopath,"* or Ronson, *Psychopath Test*, or Fallon, *The Psychopath Inside*
23	Mike	Anderson & Kiehl "The psychopath magnetized"
25	Mike	del Guidice, "An evolutionary life history framework"
March 1	*Spring Break*	NO CLASS
3	*Spring Break*	NO CLASS
8	Deborah	Freud, *Civilization & Its Discontents* (excerpts)

March 10	Deborah	O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
15	Deborah	Brian Huberman, "The Changing Face of Horror" Discussion: *Silence of the Lambs* / **Paper Two Due**

IV. Gates of Difference: The Feminine, the Masculine, and the Transgressive Body

Few categories of the human have been more central to modern notions of identity and self than the one of sexuality. So much so that gender ambiguity is a challenge to the notion of "category" itself (Wilson, Eugenides), and transitions in sexual state are driven by parental conflict (Abreu, Haig). One could say that the sexualized body will always be poorly understood. Vulnerable to being desired and punished, imprisoned and idealized, rejected and judged, it finds itself forever in the crosshairs of the religious, the moral, the political, and the legal (Beauvoir, Thomson, Jay, Gilman).

17	Mike	Wilson, "Advice on the management of ambiguous genitalia to a young endocrinologist from experienced clinicians" / Eugenides, *Middlesex* (excerpts) / Ainsworth "Sex redefined"
22	Mike	Abreu "Central precocious puberty caused by mutations in the imprinted gene MKRN3" / Haig "Transfers and transitions: Parent–offspring conflict, genomic imprinting, and the evolution of human life history"
24	Deborah	Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (introduction & excerpt) Thomson, "Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure" (19 – 21)
29	Deborah	Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" Jay, *The Scar Project* (images)
31	*Midterm Break*	NO CLASS



V. Men and Machines: Our Monsters, Ourselves

"Actors aren't going to be real, they are going to be inside a computer. You watch, it's going to happen. Maybe this is the swan song for all of us." –Marlon Brando in the 1990's:

Monsters are our children. They provoke both pride and envy, triumph and anxiety. In this unit we consider the destruction of the human during the holocaust (Levi), the beginning of it all in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, computer-generated facsimiles (Mori, Talbot), artificial intelligence (Bohannon, Ex Machina, Her), and the engineering of life (Travis, de Chant & Nielsen, Zilberman),

April	5	Deborah	Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*
	7	Deborah	Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (excerpts) / Goya (images)
	12	**Monster Ball**	STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
	14	Mike	Mori, "Uncanny Valley" / Talbot, "Pixel Perfect" Bohannon, "Synthetic Therapist"/ Films: *Ex Machina, Her*
	19	Mike	Travis, "Making the cut, CRISPR genome-editing technology shows its power"/ de Chant & Nielsen, "Genetically engineering almost everything" / Zilberman,"Continents divided: Understanding differences between Europe and North America in acceptance of GM crops"
	21	**Monster Ball**	STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

Requirements And Grading

- Two 5-page papers (counting 20% each) should meld your own ideas with those of the writers we will have discussed in class. We will be looking for coherence, originality, good argument, critical thinking, and an effort to allow the insights of the scientific and the humanistic to guide your thinking.

- Another 20% will be based on a project you complete in the context of a small working group of three persons, dedicated to studying a topic of interest to you all. One of you might do a 5-minute class presentation of your group's findings, another a poster, the third a creative work (a painting, sculpture, poem, collage, mechanical invention or the like). Or you might have different plans that you'd like us to consider. We would like all the groups to come speak to us about their plans once these begin to gel.

- A final exam that we actually thik you'll enjoy, and counting another 20%, will test not your memory of small details but rather your broad ability to talk about the ideas and the problems that have been raised in class and in our readings over the course of the semester/

- Finally, regular attendance and engaged participation—enormously important in this class—along with completion of occasional response papers, will account for the final 20% of your grade.

Important Notes:

- Do let us know in advance if you can if you will be unable to attend class.
- Papers and presentations must be written individually (plagiarism is an honor code violation)
- students are free, however, to seek critical input on drafts of papers and presentations from the two of us and from other third parties as long as this involves suggestions from improvement and not rewriting.

- Students with disabilities are encouraged to speak with us about any needed accommodations at any time, and to contact the Director of Disabled Student Services at the Ley Student Center for any guidance that we cannot provide.

Course Objectives

- To become familiar with the literature of the monstrous and with the complex cultural, sexual, medical, and scientific questions it has raised (and continues to raise) over time
- To become skilled in reading texts critically and closely, whether primary, theoretical, or visual
- To become more effective writers in the context of shorter and longer papers
- To become increasingly adept at articulating ones ideas verbally, and at responding to the ideas of others
- To create, independently, written, visual, oral, and artistic works, and to share these with fellow students